

Urban Highlight 1

WORLD URBAN FORUM (WUF) 2026 | BAKU, AZERBAIJAN



Image above: WUF 13 venue in Baku. By Anja van der Watt

The thirteenth session of the **World Urban Forum (WUF13)**, held in Baku from 17 to 22 May under the theme **“Housing the World: Safe and Resilient Cities and Communities”**, positioned housing not only as a social necessity, but as a driver of urban resilience, economic inclusion and sustainable territorial development. Discussions highlighted that the global housing crisis requires **integrated urban approaches** linking housing, infrastructure, land, transport, resilience and local governance.

A key message from the high-level Dialogue 1, “The Global Housing Crisis: What is the Plan?”, was the need to move beyond fragmented housing interventions toward scalable, place-based urban investment strategies. The discussion was further reinforced by a video message from EU Commissioner for Housing and Energy, Dan Jørgensen, who underlined the **political urgency of addressing housing affordability and the need for coordinated action across all levels of governance**. Matthew Baldwin, Deputy Director-General at DG ENER and Head of the European Commission’s Housing Task Force, stressed that housing is now a strategic priority at both European and global level. Referring to the EU’s first Affordable Housing Plan, he called for stronger coordination between governments, financial institutions, communities and the private sector to tackle affordability issues, social exclusion, and housing supply.

From an EU and DG INTPA’s development cooperation perspective, **WUF13 reinforced the importance of cities, transport corridors and metropolitan regions as engines of sustainable development and economic transformation** in EU partner countries. Discussions aligned closely with the urban dimension of the EU’s Global Gateway, particularly the need to connect infrastructure investment with urban development interventions, local economic growth and market opportunities. A recurring takeaway was that **infrastructure alone is insufficient unless embedded within coherent urban ecosystems supported by strong national and local institutions**.

As Head of the Unit for Sustainable Transport and Urban Development at DG INTPA, Sergio Oliete Josa **highlighted the role of cities as “urban nodes” within wider economic and transport corridors, linking mobility, logistics and regional integration** under the Global Gateway framework. He framed Global Gateway as a shift in EU development financing, using sustainable transport, urban mobility and infrastructure investment to support regional connectivity, economic integration and inclusive urban growth.

He further emphasised the importance of developing pipelines of investment-ready urban and transport projects capable of attracting development finance institutions and private capital at scale. These priorities were reflected in the **Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) International-led session “Towards a 360° Global Gateway: Building Housing, Infrastructure and Local Economies Through Integrated Local Action”**, which showcased how corridor and city-region approaches can generate integrated investment pipelines and stronger project origination and aggregation mechanisms to support cities in the Global South.

The **EU–African Union joint session “Linking Corridor Investment with Territorial and Urban Development for Economic Transformation, Resilience and Housing”** further underscored the importance of aligning infrastructure corridors with territorial planning, urban development and housing strategies to maximise economic impact, resilience and social inclusion. The session brought together several high-level ministers and senior officials, including H.E. Thembi Simelane, Minister of Human Settlements of South Africa, H.E. Célestine Ketcha Courtès, Minister of Infrastructure, Housing and Urban Development of Cameroon, and Professor Albert Malama, Permanent Secretary at Zambia’s Ministry of Infrastructure, Housing and Urban Development, reaffirming the political weight and strategic relevance of the discussion.

Across both sessions, local, **national and regional authorities** were repeatedly identified as essential actors for ensuring investment viability, inclusion and long-term sustainability.

Another major takeaway was the growing recognition that **private sector engagement must move beyond isolated infrastructure delivery toward long-term co-investment** in inclusive urban development ecosystems. Discussions highlighted the need for blended finance, de-risking instruments and stronger partnerships between public authorities, financial institutions and private actors to scale affordable housing and urban infrastructure solutions.

Finally, Sergio Oliete Josa also convened a closed-door Team Europe meeting with EU Member States, development agencies and banks, to discuss how to strengthen the urban dimension of the Global Gateway and better coordinate support for urban investments in partner countries. The meeting **helped build a more coherent Team Europe perspective** on project origination, municipal engagement, pipeline development and the visibility of European urban solutions ahead of the next MFF.

Overall, WUF13 highlighted the growing convergence between the New Urban Agenda, climate resilience objectives and the EU’s external investment agenda. It reinforced the EU narrative that Global Gateway investments should be anchored in the city–corridor interface, driven by integrated territorial planning, citizen participation and strong local governance as core pillars of implementation.

African cities are among the fastest growing in the world, concentrating major opportunities for green growth, jobs, innovation and digitalisation, but also pressures on land, housing, basic services, climate resilience and social cohesion. The second **African Urban Forum (AUF2)**, held in Nairobi, Kenya, from 8 to 10 April 2026, brought together ministers, local authorities, development partners and experts to discuss on this dual centrality of African cities under the theme **“Adequate housing for all: advancing socio economic and environmental transformation towards the achievement of Agenda 2063”**. AUF2 provided a high level platform to shape a shared political vision of sustainable urbanisation as a driver of the SDGs and Agenda 2063 and to advance integrated approaches linking urban planning, climate action, mobility, energy, nature, food systems and social inclusion.

Kenya hosted AUF2 in recognition of its efforts to leverage urbanisation as an opportunity and its **leadership in housing**, including the launch of the Global Championship for Decent Housing and its co leadership of the Building Climate Resilience with the Urban Poor (BCRUP) initiative, which promotes innovative and sustainable housing solutions enhancing resilience for the urban poor.

The Forum was a **continental steppingstone shaping Africa’s common position ahead of the World Urban Forum (WUF13) in Baku in May 2026**, with the [AUF2 Nairobi Declaration](#) adopted in the closing high level session. This Declaration, which will be submitted to the African Union Assembly planned for February 2027, underscores that **urbanisation is “an opportunity that must be harnessed for the present and future structural transformation of Africa”** and that [Agenda 2063](#) will be successfully advanced by **how African cities are planned, governed, and managed** so that they become true engines of economic growth, social inclusion, and sustainable development.” Moreover, it invites the African Union’s Specialized Technical Committee No. 8 on Public Service, Local Government, Urban Development and Decentralisation to consider **making “Urbanization Management for Structural Transformation” a priority theme for the African Union** during the next planning cycle, including the possibility of dedicating a Summit of Heads of State and Government session to housing and urbanisation in Africa.

The **Forum confirmed that African urbanisation is firmly recognised as a central lever for structural transformation and resilience on the continent**, requiring the active participation of all levels of governance, including the local one, one in continental debates on housing, climate and urban development at large.



Image above: Nairobi, Kenya. By Ron John on Unsplash